

Pure Substance': Encyclopedia Reflects Advances In Scholarship And Interpretation

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Review

'PURE SUBSTANCE'

Encyclopedia reflects advances in scholarship and interpretation

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Heidler, David S., Gallagher, Gary W., and Neely, Mark E., Jr.
Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History. ABC-Clio Inc, 2000-11-01. ISBN 1576070662

The formidable task of marshaling the resources and experts necessary to create a multi-volume Civil War reference work probably rivals the logistical demands of that conflict's greatest battles. Perhaps that explains why few comprehensive Civil War encyclopedias have made their way onto the scene. But now this conspicuous void has been filled. Editors David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler undertook the challenge of producing a work of encyclopedic scope, and the result is a 2,733-page **Encyclopedia of the American Civil War** that distinguishes itself as the most exhaustively researched resource to have come out since the *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy* (Simon & Schuster, 1993).

At the invitation of the Heidlers, highly accomplished Civil War historians such as Gary W. Gallagher, James I. Robertson, Jr., William C. Davis, and Charles P. Roland composed the encyclopedia's 1,600 entries. Military-related subjects predominate, but the editors also survey political and social aspects, achieving a judicious balance of topics. Biographies compose the majority of articles; the likes of Joseph Bailey, Edouard de Stoeckl, Barbara Frietschie, and countless other lesser-known figures are presented in addition to all the more famous ones. And battles from Antietam to Yellow Bayou are aptly treated, as are myriad other subjects, including acoustic shadows, bonds, and Italian-Americans. The entries reflect recent advances in scholarship and interpretation, and the editorial perspective throughout is evenhanded.

As purely a reference work, the encyclopedia admirably fulfills its duty of facilitating further research on the Civil War. Cross-references that accompany each article make textual navigation easy; short bibliographies following each

entry provide the reader with relevant primary and secondary sources. A mammoth appendix and documents section fills the entire fifth volume, offering an eclectic trove of primary texts selected to cover all aspects of the war. The encyclopedia is capped off by a detailed chronology and a most generous bibliography and comprehensive index.

No work of this scope will be perfect, and more experienced historians may be perplexed by the excessive attention it sometimes gives to less decisive subjects. Biographies of many comparatively minor figures, for example, often garner as much or more space than do some articles for entire states. Smaller military engagements also are given inordinate space to the detriment of other, perhaps more important topics. Some of this unevenness probably can be attributed to the collaborative manner in which over 300 scholars contributed entries to the work.

With a price that matches the heft of its pages, this fine set may be more affordable for libraries and academic institutions than for individuals. Yet all those who purchase and use the encyclopedia are almost certain to be pleased and impressed. The five-volume set demonstrates how valuable reference tools of this kind can be.

The **Encyclopedia of the American Civil War** is essentially functional in design. It is not a splashy picture book destined for the coffee table-it is a research tool. Yes, ample pictures and maps supplement the text, but there are no fancy graphics, color photos, or glossy pages. And that is good, even if sadly the exception these days. It is pure substance.

Charles L. McCollum assists with copyediting CWBR. He interviewed southern historian William J. Cooper, Jr. in the Winter 2001 issue.